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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews approaches to understanding how adolescents of different ages and abilities read and understand literature. The specific examples discussed focus on the contrast between "describer" and "explainer" responses to passages in which literary characters experience sudden and traumatic changes in their lives. Results from the application of this approach are briefly summarized, and implications for teachers are discussed. An appendix summarizes coding criteria used in scoring students' discussions of test passages. (AA)

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Adolescent Interpretation of Literature

Workshop Seminars (Introductory Material)

A. Context of the area explored

This discussion arises from research very close to the classroom. The materials have already been used directly in classroom teaching and they have formed the core of an educational broadcast series on BBC Radio Birmingham. The research is in the tradition of Squire (1964), Inglis (1971) and Britton (1971) and others who have used detailed analysis of pupils' open-ended responses as a basis for their discussions. Working with a psychological model, Peel (1971) too, has coded adolescent "judgments", (defined as a form of thinking required when there is no single correct response to be discovered) but he has been more interested in the processes of thought, the development of thought and the attendant improvement in understanding of material presented to pupils in the classroom. These aspects are of primary interest here, together with a particular process ("stability and change") inherent in given passages of literature. This process of stability/change involves key modal concepts like time, compensation and causality which readers need to understand in virtually all subject areas.

B. Aims in this seminary

The main aim, in these seminars, is to consider how adolescents of different ages and abilities read and understand literature. Using literary and psychological models we will attempt to evaluate actual responses made by pupils to selected extracts depicting characters in situations of sudden change. Insights gained into the way understanding develops in more able children will then form the basis of some discussion relating to how structured classroom approaches might bring low level thinkers to higher levels of thinking and understanding.

C. Interpreting stability/change situations in literature

Literature abounds with examples of individuals experiencing sudden and traumatic changes in their lives. Milton's Adam is seized with anguish, discerning the fundamentally changed situation as Eve reacts ecstatically; Oliver Twist escapes the overwhelming Mr. Bumble to find himself amidst Sowerberry's coffins. In more contemporary terms, consider the story of a boy enjoying an essentially stable life with his single parent, his mother. The change comes when she suddenly dies and there is only a distant, unsympathetic relative to care for him. What are the boy's feelings? How exactly did he come to feel as he did? Can anyone do anything to help him? How might he feel two or three weeks after the events?

What does the reader have to understand about a stability/change situation in order to answer these questions and, most importantly, justify his answers? He needs to realize that one change requires another change to bring stability, i.e. a compensating factor is required; he needs to be sensitive to relationships breaking and the possibility of new bonds forming; he needs to be sensitive to all this happening within a time scale and within a pattern of cause and effect.

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Such questions can be answered at different "levels" to reveal different qualities of interpretation. Invoking a literary model we might wish to speak of "narrational" or "interpretational" level (Squire, 1964) and with "comprehension" rather than literary response in mind we might find an outcome understood at a "literal" or "inferential" level (Barrett 1972). We might consider too how the responses reflect different levels of thinking related to Piaget's "concrete" and "formal" operations or more appropriately perhaps in a literary context, we could speak of "describer" and"explainer" thinking (Peel, 1971). Describer thinking is seen when a reader has reproduced only given material without reference to other ideas or experience; explainer thinking is indicated by outcomes which invoke concepts from the reader's own experience and so conveys "sense" rather than purely "meaning" (Vygotsky, 1962 p143).

A describer/explainer model can be used to code all responses to a given piece of literature so that we might find an extract which presents part of a stability/change cycle such as that of the orphaned boy outlined earlier, give it, together with questions, to our readers then code their responses. The level of thinking and the reader's sensitivity to this fundamental process of stability/change is then inferred from the pupils' judgments.

D. The pattern of understanding

Adolescent thinking about people in situations of sudden change portrayed in literature, is related to age and ability in broadly the same way as thinking, or more particularly "judgment" in other subject areas. There is a greater degree of explainer thinking in older adolescents than younger; there is more explainer thinking amongst "abler" adolescents (mean I.Q. 110) than "less able" (mean I.Q. 95). It cannot be assumed that the pattern of increasing explainer thinking with age is the same for all groups of adolescents; less able show a significant increase (i.e. statistically significant) in "explainer" or "partial explainer" at 15+ years only, the high ability at both 14+ and 15+ (comparing adolescents at 12+, 13+, 14+ and 15+). There is very little shift from describer to explainer thinking in "low" groups but there is some movement towards the intermediate level ("describer/explainer"). Even though groups like these exclude highest and lowest intelligence there is a marked difference between them. The "low" groups are two years or more behind "high" groups when overall scores and "explainer" scores are compared.

At describer level there is little understanding of the situation the readers appear to have been unable to assimilate the essential features and therefore fail to see it as a whole in terms of cause and effect. There seems little awareness of human relationships in a state of dynamic stability and therefore little awareness of the depth of the disturbance. Asked to explain how Philip came to feel as he did after the death of his mother and how his uncle might have helped more ('Of Human Bondage, Maugham, Chapter 3) "describer" thinkers were restricted to isolated items of material:

a) Philip must have felt like crying because everything was going to be sold.

b) Mr. Carey could have done more, he could have left him his belongings.

At the intermediate level (describer/explainer) there is some

recognition of the total situation in terms of cause and effect. There is some awareness of a possible changing pattern in human relationships with time and of personal disturbance following a spontaneous change. There is some recognition too of the compensation required to reverse the change:

a) When Philip slipped out of the room he must have felt very miserable, his mother dead, Emma leaving, him going to school and all this happening in a very short time. Perhaps the little boy did not like his uncle, because the uncle didn't seem to like the boy and Emma his nurse being sent away, maybe he would never see her again.

b) Mr. Carey could have helped Philip by not mentioning his mother or by sending Emma away and perhaps if he was told more about what his new school life would be like he could have comforted the boy so that he would be more interested in the present than sad and miserable about the death of his mother.

At explainer level, readers are able to understand the total cause/effect situation and invoke explanatory concepts from their experience. In particular they show their awareness of human relationships in a state of dynamic stability, variable with time, and of the considerable compensation required to reverse the change:

a) Philip felt very sad because all he wanted now was to be with Emma. He had a very close relationship with Emma and wanted to be near her all the time as he had been left to Mr. Carey's and his Aunt Louise's care. He didn't really feel comfortable with them and this is why he wanted Emma to stay, so as to soften the blow. He felt very uneasy and lonesome without Emma as well as his mother. He wanted to be with people he was used to and whom he loved.

b) I think Mr. Carey could have done much more to help Philip. Although he knew little about children he could have accepted Philip gratefully. He could have shown love towards him and comforted him as he must have known what it is like to feel lost in the world, especially to a small boy who had only lived with them for two weeks when he was ill. He could have tried to welcome Philip more warmly and told him the things he could not have as a more gradual process for he had much on his mind at that moment and a completely new way of life was startling to him and frightening.

E. Implications

It seems that many adolescents need considerable help in interpreting literature depicting people in crisis situations, even when, in "readability" terms the story falls well within their ability. The material provided by the pupils themselves in their responses or judgments might well form the basis of discussion designed to develop greater sensitivity to human attitudes, feelings and motives and therefore establish a greater degree of explainer thinking.

The leap from describer to explainer thinking is a considerable one. It seems important to lead less able adolescents first to "full" describer thinking where all relevant items are listed,

then to describer/explainer thinking (marked by an absence of abstract concepts but where there is a moving towards a grasp of stability/change situations). From this level a move to full explanatory thinking requires the forming of a body of more general, abstract concepts which describe human behaviour, and relationships.

Some adolescents seem not to possess the language resources that Inglis (1971) writes of in his "function 2 : creating a tenderness for people". Discussion arising from the response to the test battery would form the basis of an approach to develop a sensitivity to relationships in real life. Again, the test battery might form the basis of an approach within a broader literary framework where short term crisis situations are a preliminary to understanding long term changes in families, communities and whole societies (Inglis 1971)

It might be possible to consider the progress of adolescents and state objectives for different age/ability groups in terms of thinking levels so that the important question is not how one pupil is placed in relation to another but at which level of thinking an individual or a group is capable of operating when responding to written mater[illegible]

The implications for research are many with a wide range of questions raised relating to test design, short and long term effects of tuition and cognitive/affective interaction. All these avenues can be pursued by classroom teachers. Already many are familiar with the basic approaches described here therefore it is a matter of systematic collection of material and analyses in familiar areas rather than involvement in unfamiliar, esoteric research. Projects like "Children as Readers" (Schools Council/NATE) and more recently, "Writing across the Curriculum" (Schools Council, London Institute of Education) as well as many local curriculum development projects have shown how teachers can be involved in group researches closely related to classroom learning. The research can be presented in statistical terms and some will find comfort in statistically significant differences between groups but the fascination for most teachers will be in the responses themselves. It is from here that teaching can proceed.

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APPENDIX

Describer/explainer criteria related to stability/change situations

Level	Process	Basic coding criteria	Characteristics of Judgments	Score
1	Intuitive	irrelevant material	short items, conveying no clear meaning related to the question	0
2a	Describer	one item of information without explanation and no sensitivity to stability/change	material very closely related to the passage with an absence of inference and explanatory concepts	1
2b	Describer	two or more items of information without explanation and no sensitivity to stability/change		1
3	Describer/ explainer	several items of information with partial explanation and some suggestion of sensitivity to stability/change	suggestions of the whole situation, some recognition of human relationships changing; groping attempts to explain these relationships	2
4	Explainer	several items of information with inferences and evaluation revealing a comprehensive sensitivity to stability/ change	detailed appraisal of the total situation; sensitivity to sequential effects of change over time arising from changed relationships; invocation of apt concepts to explain relationships	3